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Tajuk : Unimas takes steps to preserve Meirek language

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MIRI: In an effort to preserve the Meirek language, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) is conducting a comprehensive study on the language, which according to researchers is among the oldest spoken languages in the world.

Unimas Dean for Language Studies, Dr Norazuna Norahim said the study aimed to maintain and elevate the language began in 2014, and was expected to end this August.

"In the two years, we have managed to document and collect some 2,500 words for the purpose of producing the first Meirek-language dictionary," she said, adding the project was supported by government funds totalling RM57,000.

Unimas would however, continue with the study on the Meirek language even after August, she said.

Norazuna said it would normally

take five to seven years to publish a dictionary and this would require the cooperation and commitment of the Meirek community due to the complexity of the language.

"We hope the first dictionary will at least, provide information on the pronunciation, word categories and meaning of words."

In addition to the dictionary, she said a method was being devised to create a standard form of spelling which could be used to develop the Meirek language further.

According to her, with the standard spelling agreed upon by the Meirek community, they could use it to produce reading, teaching and learning materials for the language.

For that purpose, she said, Unimas organised the first Meirek language spelling workshop last month, followed by the second session to be held soon.

Norazuna said in terms of the

number of Meirek speakers, a study by Unimas lecturer Bibi Aminah Abdul Ghani found that less than 5,000 of the community members could speak the language.

For the record, the only book on the language found in the country is 'A Guide to the Jatti Meirek Language' (Translated from Bahasa Malaysia) which was printed and published by the Miri Meirek Jatti Association (PJMM) in 2008.

The exact date when the Meirek community first set foot in Sarawak is not known. Nevertheless, there are suggestions the community came about between 200 and 300 years ago. The name, Miri, is said to have originated from the word 'Meirek'.

Today, the Meirek population numbers about 10,000, with a majority of them living in northern Sarawak and Brunei.
— Bernama